

# September 11th Assistance

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**W**e've just been advised that a second plane has crashed into New York's World Trade Center. "I must be dreaming," I thought to myself as I aimed for the snooze button. But it was not a dream. As for everyone else on the planet, I awoke to a different world on September 11.

Less than 24 hours later, the telephone rang. "Hello, John? This is Tom Rosenbury. We're pulling the team together to deploy the radars. I believe that we can help. Do you want to go?"

"Absolutely," I answered without hesitating.

"There have to be survivors," I thought as I got ready. "Thousands of people can't just disappear like that." With more than 7 years of search-and-rescue experience under my belt, I know that survivors in disasters can be unbelievably resilient. Now, as part of the Lab team that develops applications for impulse radar including personnel localization, how can I turn down a chance to do my best to help?

"There could be tens of thousands of casualties . . .," the radio reporter blared on as I arrived at the airport. "If we can help to locate even one survivor . . .," I thought as I waited for our flight.

Ten Lab employees made up the team. It was a diverse team of engineers, technicians, a physician, and a Hazards Control officer. We had a world of experiences and expertise amongst us. But what a ragtag team we were. Many of us had worked together previously; others we'd never met. It was amazing how we all pulled together to get the logistics, operations, and planning done under such short notice and duress. We were out the door of the Lab less than 24 hours after being activated, not bad for an ad hoc response team.

The DOE airplane finally arrived, even as the national airspace remained shut down. "No! Your equipment can't all fit!" the steward screamed through the turbine. "But

they're all critical components! They need to fit!" Doug Poland screamed back. After some passionate exchanges, all of the equipment was shoved into every crevice of what now seemed like a very tiny airplane.

Close to midnight, we finally made it over Manhattan. As we flew over where the World Trade Centers had stood less than 60 hours before, we were silenced by the sight. While the rest of Manhattan cast the old familiar night-lights, lower Manhattan was blotted out as if by some giant thumb. We stared as the fire and emergency lights cast shadows of billowing smoke onto blacked-out surrounding structures. Words cannot describe the surreal scene.

Hours later, Tom and I were sitting at the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) command post at the Javits Convention Center waiting for our orders. As the adage goes, it's hurry up and wait. So we impatiently waited, while planning, planning, and more planning became the name of the game.

Finally, we headed to Ground Zero with the FEMA U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) Massachusetts Task Force team. As we passed the last checkpoint controlled by the National Guardsmen, we settled in as much as one possibly can at the FEMA staging area. We were staged right at Ground Zero, the inner perimeter of the disaster. The scene is overwhelming, but what will last with me forever will be the smell of the fumes and the noise of the incessant jackhammers.

My first mission was to work with a fire engine company from Queens, consisting of a handful of guys led by Brian, the



lieutenant. Vinnie was to be my wingman; Billy, Jim, Mark, and John made up the rest of the search crew. We headed into the “pile” and the collapsed perimeter to scout for possible voids.

Crawling around the pile of what had been 110-story skyscrapers was like a combination of mountaineering crevasse work and caving. Instead of the snow and ice of the crevasse or the dampness of the cave, we were in a world of sharpened rebar and twisted girders. The greatest danger—aside from having hundreds of tons of debris collapse and crush you—was stepping inadvertently on a false floor and getting sliced up.

When we did find a void or a partially collapsed room, I took out my radar, which was retrofitted into a 6-volt flashlight housing, and spot-checked for signs of life. We would often go between regions of total destruction filled only with pulverized concrete, broken cell phones, and split keyboards, and then crawl right through an opening into mall spaces where dusty sweaters in the Gap store were still nicely folded.

At one point, we excitedly found something scribbled on a dust-covered window of a clothing store. “Look there! It looks like a message!” I called to Vinnie. It read: “L-47 BX says RIP Brothers.” As Vinnie deciphered the message, the sobering meaning sunk in: it was the farewell message from a surviving member of a Bronx fire company saying farewell to the fallen.

Later that day, I assisted Brian’s team again. The mission was to proceed to the opposite side of the pile and do another

hasty search. Our team goal was to assist any way possible, so when the battalion chief asked us to begin a bucket line, we quickly switched gears from rescue mode to recovery mode. Searchers located numerous human remains and needed a bucket line to assist in recovery from the center of the pile. We started digging. Because of the treacherous footing, it was impossible to travel through the debris without using both hands and feet. When human remains were recovered, we sent for the body bags. When a scent was caught, we’d send for the dogs. I lost count of how many buckets I passed. Our only lifeline to the world was the single file line of rescuers snaking across the pile. We were reduced to digging on our hands and knees, using the simplest of fire-fighting tools.

How many hours I was there, I do not recall, but the day finally passed and night came. To be in the center of that pile with the fire still burning, sending plumes into the cloudless night sky, was a Wagnerian scene.

I don’t think that I did a fraction of what I had hoped, and my personal experience seems so inconsequential in light of what so many others are still going through. But what a truly unique experience it was for me to have the opportunity to try to help. What a privilege it was to have had the opportunity to work with our radar team, the FEMA USAR teams, and the New York City firefighters.



Far left: Chang searches rubble at ground zero with his radar equipment.

Left: Chang, center, takes a moment for a photo with fellow rescuers.